

Video Games as a Form of Mass Media

Posted on July 10, 2018

Mass media refers to communication systems that produce and distribute messages to large, dispersed audiences. Newspapers, books, radio, television, film, recorded music, and digital platforms are familiar examples. The original essay argues that video games should also be recognized as mass media because they entertain large audiences, communicate ideas, create communities, carry advertisements, and circulate cultural values. That argument is stronger today than it was when games were often treated mainly as toys. Video games are now global cultural products combining narrative, visual art, music, software, performance, rules, and networked participation (Bowman, 2012).

Games differ from older media because audiences do not only watch or read. Players act within designed systems. Their choices may alter sequence, perspective, difficulty, relationships, or endings, although those choices remain constrained by code and design. Interactivity does not remove mass communication; it changes its form. A developer communicates through environments, mechanics, rewards, restrictions, characters, interfaces, and stories, while players interpret, perform, modify, discuss, and redistribute meaning.

What Makes a Medium “Mass”?

A medium becomes mass media when it can reproduce and distribute content at scale beyond direct face-to-face communication. A printed novel may be read privately, but it is mass media because thousands or millions can receive substantially the same text. A game similarly reaches large populations through consoles, computers, mobile devices, cloud services, physical discs, downloads, streaming, and subscription platforms.

Not every game needs a mass audience to belong to a mass-media form. An independent title downloaded by a small community uses the same industrial and technological channels as a blockbuster. The distinction concerns the medium’s capacity and social organization, not only one product’s sales.

Games also operate through institutions resembling other media industries: publishers, studios, distributors, platforms, ratings boards, advertisers, reviewers, journalists, fan communities, intellectual-property owners, and regulators. These institutions decide what is funded, promoted, visible, preserved, and accessible.

Entertainment as Communication

The primary purpose of many games is entertainment, but entertainment always communicates something. Rules define what actions are possible, rewards identify valued behavior, and stories position players toward characters and conflicts. Even a puzzle game teaches the player how to interpret patterns, failure, and progress (Bogost, 2007).

A war game may communicate assumptions about heroism, enemies, technology, geography, and legitimate violence. A city-building game models taxation, infrastructure, land use, public services, and growth. A life simulation represents work, family, consumption, and social relationships. These models simplify reality, as all media do, but simplification can shape understanding.

Players are not necessarily persuaded exactly as designers intend. They may criticize the premise, play against the expected objective, create satire, or focus only on mechanical challenge. Meaning emerges from interaction among the designed text, the player's background, and the surrounding community.

Video Games and Shared Culture

Mass media helps create shared references. People quote films, discuss news, recognize popular songs, and identify with fictional characters. Games perform the same function. Characters, sounds, maps, gestures, and phrases move into memes, clothing, music, sport, film, and everyday conversation.

Gaming communities form around genres, franchises, competitive play, speedrunning, modding, collecting, accessibility, criticism, and creative production. These communities can cross national boundaries while developing specialized language and norms. Shared play creates social identity even when participants never meet physically.

The original essay correctly notes that games bring enthusiasts together. Networked games make this process visible through teams, guilds, voice chat, tournaments, and live events. Single-player games also create communities through forums, videos, fan fiction, artwork, and interpretation (Jenkins, 2006).

Interactivity and the Active Audience

Media audiences have never been entirely passive. Readers imagine scenes, viewers interpret film, and listeners connect songs with experience. Video games make audience activity necessary because the program often cannot proceed without input. The player must learn rules, choose actions, and respond to feedback.

This active role can deepen engagement. A player who makes a difficult choice may feel responsibility that differs from watching a character make the same decision. Repetition through play can also strengthen familiarity with a system or message.

However, interactivity should not be confused with unlimited freedom. Designers control the available choices, consequences, camera, economy, and victory conditions. A game may create the feeling of agency while directing the player toward a narrow outcome. Critical analysis asks not only what choice was made but which choices were excluded.

Games as Narrative Media

Many games tell stories through dialogue, cinematic scenes, documents, environmental design, character movement, and player action. Some use linear narratives similar to film. Others allow branching paths or emergent stories created through systems.

Narrative games can address grief, migration, war, disability, identity, family, political oppression, and memory. Their ability to place players within a perspective can support empathy, though playing a role does not automatically provide accurate understanding of another person's lived experience (Murray, 1997).

The educational value depends on research, context, and reflection. A historically inspired game may motivate further learning while also changing chronology or simplifying politics for dramatic effect. Teachers should treat it as an interpretation rather than a neutral simulation.

Procedural Rhetoric

Games communicate not only through words and images but through procedures. The rules make arguments about how a system works. If success in a management game always requires reducing labor costs, the game models workers primarily as expenses. If a political game rewards compromise, it suggests one theory of governance; if it rewards conquest, it suggests another.

This procedural form distinguishes games from many traditional media. A film can state that resources are scarce. A game can make the player allocate scarce resources and experience consequences. The model remains designed and may be biased, but interaction turns an abstract claim into a repeated process.

Advertising Inside Games

The original essay discusses companies using games to advertise products, including vehicle placement within a military franchise. Games carry several forms of advertising. Static in-game ads

resemble billboards. Dynamic ads can be updated through internet connections. Product placement integrates branded clothing, vehicles, food, or equipment into the fictional world. Advergaming is created mainly to promote a brand.

Mobile games often use rewarded video, banners, interstitial ads, and offers. The player may watch an advertisement to receive currency, extra lives, or faster progress. This system makes advertising part of the game's economy rather than an external interruption.

Ethical concerns include disclosure, targeting, data collection, children's vulnerability, and the boundary between ordinary play and commercial pressure. When a branded item provides superior in-game performance, the game may communicate product value through mechanics rather than through an explicit claim.

Games Marketed Through Other Mass Media

The original article notes that games themselves are promoted through television, radio, billboards, buses, and online media. This cross-promotion shows that media forms operate as an ecosystem. A game launch may include trailers, influencer previews, soundtrack releases, merchandise, films, and live events.

Being advertised through mass media does not by itself prove that games are mass media. A household appliance can also be advertised widely. The stronger evidence is that games themselves distribute designed messages at scale. Cross-media marketing demonstrates their industrial integration with other cultural industries.

Propaganda and Political Meaning

Games can promote national, military, religious, corporate, or ideological narratives. War games may frame one country as the defender of global order and others as threatening or irrational. Strategy games may reproduce colonial ideas in which territory is empty until conquered and resources exist for extraction.

The original essay describes a military game portraying the United States as the world's savior. Such interpretation is open to debate, but it raises a useful question: whose perspective organizes the conflict? The player may spend hours acting from one military viewpoint while civilian lives, diplomacy, and historical causes remain peripheral.

Governments and armed forces have also used games for recruitment, training, and public engagement. Propaganda does not require every statement to be false. It often selects facts, emotions, and identities to encourage a preferred attitude.

Representation

Games influence how audiences encounter gender, race, nationality, disability, age, and sexuality. Early mainstream games often offered limited protagonists and stereotyped women as rewards or victims. Representation has broadened, but debate continues over character design, voice, labor, and cultural appropriation.

Inclusion matters because repeated patterns shape who appears capable of heroism, intelligence, leadership, or complexity. Yet representation should not be measured only by counting characters. Writers, artists, performers, consultants, and communities influence whether portrayals possess depth.

Violence and Effects

Public debate frequently asks whether violent games cause aggression or crime. Research finds that media effects are complex and generally smaller than sensational claims suggest. Short-term arousal or aggressive thoughts should not be equated automatically with serious violence. Family environment, mental health, social conditions, access to weapons, and many other factors matter.

Critical discussion should avoid two extremes: claiming that games directly create violent criminals or claiming that media never influences anyone. Games can normalize ideas, provide emotional rehearsal, or affect mood while not functioning as a simple cause. The content, player, context, and pattern of use all matter.

Simulation of Guns

The original essay uses *NRA Gun Club* to suggest that realistic simulation could repel players from gun ownership. That conclusion is speculative without evidence from players. A gun simulation could discourage, educate, entertain, or attract different individuals.

Games can teach terminology, handling concepts, or mechanical sequences, but virtual performance is not equivalent to real-world competence. Safe firearm training requires qualified instruction, legal knowledge, secure storage, and physical practice under controlled conditions. A game's representation may omit recoil, injury, responsibility, and emotional consequences.

News Games and Documentary Games

Some games are designed to explain current events or social systems. News games may model elections, migration, public budgets, or humanitarian crises. Documentary games use archives,

testimony, and reconstructed environments.

These forms make the mass-media role especially clear. They combine journalism or documentary purpose with interaction. Their credibility depends on sourcing, transparency, and acknowledgment of the simplifications required by rules.

Educational Games

Games can support learning through practice, feedback, repetition, visualization, and safe experimentation. They are used in language learning, health education, military training, engineering, and professional simulation.

Educational value does not arise from adding points to any task. A poorly designed game can distract, oversimplify, or reward guessing. Effective design aligns mechanics with learning goals and includes explanation and transfer beyond the game.

Streaming and Esports

Gaming now reaches audiences who watch rather than play. Livestreamers, video creators, and esports broadcasts transform play into performance. Commentators explain strategy, spectators form communities, and advertisers sponsor teams and events.

This convergence weakens any remaining claim that games are merely private toys. A single competition can function simultaneously as software, sport, television, social media, and advertising platform.

User-Generated Content

Players create modifications, maps, characters, videos, reviews, and entire game modes. Some platforms depend heavily on user creators. This participatory culture makes audiences producers as well as consumers.

Ownership and labor become important. Platforms may profit from unpaid or underpaid creators, restrict access to work, or change revenue rules. Community creativity does not eliminate corporate control over infrastructure.

Game Economies

Contemporary games may include downloadable content, subscriptions, cosmetic items, loot boxes, season passes, and virtual currencies. These systems are messages about value and consumption as

well as business models.

Loot boxes and randomized rewards have drawn concern because they resemble gambling mechanisms, particularly for children. Transparent probability, spending controls, age protection, and clear currency conversion help users understand cost. Design that intentionally frustrates players to sell relief deserves ethical scrutiny.

Data and Personalization

Games can collect detailed behavioral data: play time, purchases, social connections, location, device, mistakes, and response to offers. Analytics help improve balance and detect abuse, but they also enable targeted monetization.

Players should know what is collected and how it is used. Children require stronger protection. Privacy settings and consent should be understandable rather than buried in long agreements.

Censorship and Regulation

Governments regulate games through age ratings, consumer law, privacy rules, gambling restrictions, and content controls. Some countries censor political, sexual, religious, or violent material. Platforms also moderate user communication and content.

Regulation must distinguish protection from moral panic. Age information and consumer safeguards can support families, while broad bans may suppress artistic or political expression. Evidence and transparent standards are essential.

Games and Social Relationships

Games can strengthen friendship, teamwork, and family connection. They can also expose players to harassment, exclusion, fraud, and unhealthy pressure. Online communities reflect wider society rather than existing outside it.

Moderation, reporting, accessibility, and inclusive design affect who can participate safely. The medium's social value depends partly on governance.

Preservation

Like film and television, games are cultural records. Preservation is difficult because software depends on hardware, servers, licenses, and online services. When a company closes a server, a work may become inaccessible even to people who purchased it.

Libraries, archives, scholars, and developers must address emulation, source code, copyright, and documentation. Recognizing games as mass media strengthens the argument that they deserve preservation as part of cultural history.

Critical Game Literacy

Players should learn to analyze mechanics, representation, business models, data collection, and ideology. Asking only whether a game is fun overlooks how it organizes attention and behavior.

Critical literacy does not require rejecting games. It allows deeper enjoyment and more informed choice. Players can appreciate design while questioning stereotypes, monetization, or political framing.

Conclusion

Video games are a form of mass media because they distribute cultural products to large audiences, communicate through narrative and rules, carry advertising, create shared identities, and operate within global media industries. Their interactive character distinguishes them from television or print without removing them from the category.

The original essay correctly emphasizes entertainment, information, community, advertising, propaganda, and active audiences. These functions have expanded through mobile gaming, streaming, esports, user-generated content, and virtual economies. Games can teach, persuade, commercialize, represent, and misrepresent.

Treating games as mass media encourages serious analysis rather than viewing them only as toys. Like books, films, and television, they deserve criticism, ethical standards, consumer protection, artistic recognition, and preservation. Their most distinctive contribution is procedural communication: players do not merely receive a message but act inside a designed model of how the world works.

Works Cited

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